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ABSTRACT

Recruiting and retaining qualified, competent teachers is an ongoing problem for small school administrators. The reasons for high turnover are numerous and complex, e.g., preservice preparation is presently more suitable for large, metropolitan schools than for small, rural schools; career orientations fail to recognize that experience in small schools advances future plans and goals; and there may be a mismatch of personal value systems and rural lifestyles. Incentives for teachers to accept employment and to remain in small schools are varied and frequently innovative. Some are of no or low cost and are within existing resources; others require additional funds which may be obtainable only through legislative action, voter participation, or local largesse. Superintendents, school boards, and communities must exercise their creativity in recruiting and retaining good teachers and must work cooperatively to secure the additional funding required to meet the need for a competent and stable teaching staff. This digest defines the small school and discusses the following: reasons for high teacher turnover, old and new recruitment strategies, the housing problem, intrinsic advantages of small schools, salary and related incentives, retention activities, payment for incentives, and mutual support among small school districts. (NQA)

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FINDING AND KEEPING TEACHERS: STRATEGIES FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

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FINDING AND KEEPING TEACHERS: STRATEGIES FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

Recruiting and retaining qualified, competent teachers is an ongoing problem for small school administrators. However, defining the common characteristics of small schools and identifying the relationship between such characteristics and the common problem of high teacher turnover have yielded some suggestions for improvement.

Definition of the Small School

Small schools exist in urban areas, and not all nonmetropolitan schools are small. Small school districts located near metropolitan areas face a different set of problems than do those more distant. Many school districts of small enrollment are large in geographical areas. A common characteristic of small schools, in addition to their small enrollment, is that most are rural and often isolated by distance and terrain. Despite 40 years of massive consolidation, more than one-quarter of all school districts still enroll fewer than 300 students. More than half a million students attend these schools, and fifty thousand teachers instruct in them.

Reasons for High Teacher Turnover

Many teachers employed in small schools come reluctantly and don't stay long. Superintendents of small school districts consider teacher recruitment and retention among their most pressing problems. The reasons for high turnover are numerous and complex. These include the following:

- Preservice preparation is presently more suitable for large, metropolitan schools than for small, rural schools.
- Career orientations fail to recognize that experience in small schools advances future plans and goals.
- Teachers often have inadequate experiential and psychological preparation for the demands and limitations of small schools and rural communities.
- There may be a mismatch of personal value systems and rural lifestyles.
- There is discontinuity between idyllic expectations and harsh realities.
- Administrators of small school districts sometimes employ inappropriate and inadequate recruitment strategies.

Recruitment Strategies — Old and New

Traditional recruitment strategies are generally appropriate for large districts and for districts near metropolitan areas. These are the strategies frequently taught in administrator training programs, and many are also appropriate for small and rural schools. Among the most useful strategies common to small, as well as large, schools are the following:

- Analysis — determine school and community needs.
- Planning — develop an annual recruitment calendar.
- Preparation — compile a recruitment package for applicants, prospective applicants, and college placement offices; include job announcement, salary schedule, school calendar, school and community profiles and resources, and application form.

Marketing for rural education and small schools requires additional strategies (Miller 1982; Seifert and Kurtz 1983; Lewis and Edington 1981):

- Seek a specific audience. Recruit at colleges drawing from rural areas and review college placement files for persons who came from nearby or similar rural areas. (Persons who grew up in rural settings are more likely to be satisfied in rural school districts.)
- Emphasize the quality of rural life and the availability of leisure-time activities.
- Stress special features — geography, climate, historical sites, cuisine, and isolation. (One person's peace and quiet may be another's cabin fever.)
- Recruit the family, not just the prospective teacher. Arrange (require!) family interviews with overnight or weekend visits.
- Include school support personnel in such recruitment activities as preparing information packets, seeking applicants, and participating in interview activities.
- Involve the community in recruitment efforts by having a school patron host the prospective family, by encouraging a community potluck, and/or by arranging a tour of areas of interest or a camping trip.
- Sensitize the community to the need for a spouse's employment. Arrange "package deals" including employment of spouse in or out of the school system.
- Emphasize the inherent advantages of small schools, but be upfront about the disadvantages of small schools and rural communities
- Pay interview relocation expenses (all or in part).

Long-range marketing strategies might include scholarships which include agreements that recipients teach in small districts — and forgiveness of student financial aid loans to persons who teach in rural areas. The financial problems of small districts may inhibit or prevent these activities, but a cooperative effort among a number of small districts may make scholarships and loan forgiveness feasible.

Solving the Housing Problem

Lack of adequate housing is often a detriment to recruiting. Housing in rural areas is generally less expensive than in urban/suburban areas but is often substandard and/or distant from the school. A number of possibilities have been enumerated by Swift (1983):

- Community involvement in recruiting efforts may open up housing that otherwise would be unavailable.
- Housing subsidized or provided (teacherages) by the school district is a tax-free benefit to the employee.
- Revenue bonds may be issued to pay for the construction with rent used to service the bonds.
- Housing could be constructed by a nearby postsecondary vocational school. Houses could be built on-site or at the vocational school and later transported to the school district. The cost would be lower than if built by a general contractor, and financing could be through revenue bonds or lease-purchase agreement.
- Housing could be constructed by the high school construction trades program. This option offers distinct possibilities for use of community resources such as donated or at-cost building materials and volunteer construction expertise.
- Construction of wind- and solar-energy laboratories for the high school science program. The laboratories can be built like houses and teachers' families can live in them.

Intrinsic Advantages of Small Schools

Despite the conventional wisdom of school consolidation, bigger is not always better. Recruiting and retention efforts should emphasize inherent advantages of small schools such as:

- Low pupil-teacher ratio.
- Individualized instruction (small schools are not for lecturers).
- Long-term satisfaction of watching students' progress.
- Opportunity to know students and their families.
- Teacher impact on curriculum and administration.
- Community activities centered on the school.
- Community involvement in the school.

Salary and Related Incentives

Salaries in small school districts are generally lower than salaries in large districts in the same state. In some states, initial salaries are comparable, but salaries in small districts fall behind as experience and training accrue. Although a good case may be made for salary equity, the recruitment and retention war will not be won solely on the basis of salaries. More important than salaries alone is the total compensation package—salaries **and** benefits. Benefits such as insurance, retirement, and worker's and unemployment compensation are often comparable. Small schools, however, can offer some monetary considerations not necessarily appropriate to large districts. These might include:

- Salary increments for multiple teaching endorsements and/or assignments. Most rural teachers must "double in brass" and may coach the chorus and operate the lights as well. Multiple endorsements provide flexibility and program breadth to the district while salary increments for multiple endorsements and preparations compensate the teacher for the additional training acquired and the additional work of multiple preparations. Thus, increments recognize multiple endorsements and preparations in addition to or in place of the college hours or degrees upon which traditional salary schedules are based.
- Tuition reimbursement for professional development activities leading to additional endorsements.
- Career ladders and merit pay. These also rate consideration, particularly if such benefits are transferable among small districts.
- Four-day teaching week. Indirectly related to salary but a part of the compensation package is a four-day week. Experiments in New Mexico and Colorado reveal a number of benefits — some serendipitous — including overwhelming endorsement by school employees.

Retention Activities

Activities to retain personnel start the day after hiring and should include (Seifert 1982; Seifert and Kurtz 1983):

- Preschool orientation to the school and district (names and duties of staff members, administrative procedures, and map), curriculum (philosophy, objectives, and course outlines), and community (names, resources, and map).
- Immediate community involvement — which might even include a Welcome-Wagon approach.
- Pairing the new teacher with a master teacher.
- Immediate involvement in some activity outside the classroom that requires interaction with other school personnel.
- Regular visits by supervisors (principal and superintendent).
- Expectations and involvement of principal and/or superintendent in defining professional development needs and appropriate activities.
- Professional leave for career development activities and for district business.
- Sabbatical leaves.
- Faculty exchanges — short-term and year-long — with other districts, large and small.
- Reimbursement (all or part) of professional dues.

Paying for Incentives

Although there is substantial disagreement over the "optimum" school size, there is substantial agreement that small schools cost more, per pupil, than larger schools. Additional revenues are needed in small districts just to offset inherently low pupil-teacher ratios. Although some incentives are of low (or no) cost to the district's budget, others require additional funds.

Common characteristics of small, rural schools, however, are inadequate finances and poor economic status of the population. Thus, generation of additional funds often requires legislative action to improve the formula on which financing is based.

Approximately 27 states include recognition of additional costs of small schools in their general aid formulas through adjustments for school size, district size, sparsity, isolation, or combinations thereof (Wright 1981). One state helps fund shared services, and a few states fund regional centers or intermediate districts which provide or coordinate shared services to and among small school districts.

States vary in their recognition of additional teacher salary costs. New Mexico, for example, recognizes training and experience while Nebraska recognizes training only. If local school districts were to recognize multiple endorsements and teaching assignments, then the general aid formula might also be changed to reflect these additional incurred costs.

Many states provide additional funding to small districts through transportation and capital outlay assistance.

An idea gaining momentum is that of locally supported school foundations. Long a tactic of higher education, the concept is moving down the educational ladder and may provide additional funding to school districts, both large and small.

Mutual Support Among Small School Districts

Local autonomy and independence are cornerstones of local school districts. These factors, coupled with prior experience with shared programs and with regional centers or intermediate districts, can be barriers to cooperation. There are some cooperative strategies, however, that should prove beneficial:

- Similar salary schedules, including **what** is recognized (training, experience, multiple endorsements, and teaching assignments), **when** it is recognized, and **how** (in terms of dollars) it is recognized.
- Agreement among districts to offer mobility on the salary schedule, including merit pay and ladder steps.
- Availability of specialized services that cannot be afforded in individual small districts but are common in large districts.
- Combined lobbying effort. Because small-district representation in state legislatures is small compared to large-district representation, only coalitions of small districts, local communities, and their representatives can wield sufficient power to accomplish the funding goals.

Summary

Incentives for teachers to accept employment and to remain in small schools are varied and frequently innovative. Some are of no or low cost and are within existing resources; others require additional funds which may be obtainable only through legislative action, voter participation, or local largesse. Superintendents, school boards, and communities must exercise their creativity in recruiting and retaining good teachers and must work cooperatively to secure the additional funding required to meet the need for a competent and stable teaching staff.

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